

Is the Soviet Union starting to disintegrate?

THE REVOLT of the Lithuanian Communist Party has brought Mikhail Gorbachev face to face with the most threatening consequence of his reform policies.

If nothing is done, he told the party Central Committee in Moscow, "we will deliberately be heading toward the disintegration of the Soviet Union."

Yet, what can he do? And from the West's point of view, would that disintegration be undesirable?

Gorbachev's planned trip to Lithuania clearly is an exploratory measure in which he hopes to find some way out of the crisis caused by the Lithuanian party's declaration of independence from the Soviet Communist Party. Lithuanian party leaders also have explicitly declared that their goal is an independent Lithuanian republic.

After permitting limited steps toward democracy within the Soviet Union itself, after permitting the nations of Eastern Europe to renounce their externally imposed Communist governments and move toward self-determination, and after condemning efforts to repress this movement in Czechoslovakia and Romania, Gorbachev would have to reverse himself totally, as well as his reform program, if he were to smash the Lithuanian independence movement by force.

Armed repression in Lithuania also would cost Gorbachev most of the credibility he has in the West as a genuine re-



**TOM
WICKER**

former intent on undoing some of the worst aspects of the cold war years; that would be costly to his reform plans for the Soviet Union, which are highly dependent on Western cooperation.

On the other hand, if Gorbachev takes no effective steps to mollify the Lithuanians — if any such steps are possible — it can hardly be doubted that they will proceed toward independence.

That, in turn, surely would set off similar independence movements in the other Baltic States, Latvia and Estonia, perhaps also in other dissident Soviet republics — leading, Gorbachev warned, "to the disintegration of the Soviet Union."

Some bitterly anti-Soviet Americans undoubtedly would celebrate that result — the final victory over "the evil empire" with which the U.S. and its allies have been engaged in cold war for nearly a half-century. The disintegration of any great nation, however, is not so simple a matter as its disappearance.

Soviet leaders, from Gorbachev down, can hardly be expected to acquiesce in any development so cataclysmic to them or to their heritage and culture; in fact,

their permissive course in Eastern Europe was a recognition of necessity and reflected their desire to preserve their own regime rather than imperil it in a vain attempt to impose their will on surrounding states.

Who knows what forces, in a disintegrating nation, might seize power, or to what methods they might resort in trying to redeem the situation? Even a truncated Soviet Union, so threatened and so led, and with a mighty nuclear arsenal, could prove a far more serious threat to peace than any Soviet regime so far.

A threatened and crumbling Soviet Union also could become a more malignant oppressor of its own peoples.

And what effect on stability in Eastern Europe, and elsewhere on the Soviet rim, might there be from the emergence of a handful of new nations eager to recoup the lost years of captivity?

If the U.S. stands for the self-determination of peoples, it can hardly oppose the ultimate independence of Lithuania and other captive Soviet republics. There may be better and safer ways to realize that independence, however, and better ways for the U.S. to support it, than through the "disintegration" of the Soviet Union.

A sound Soviet economy, leading to a stable Soviet political regime, promises more to the West — and perhaps even to Lithuania — than a disintegrating nation desperately trying to salvage itself.

Tom Wicker is a New York Times columnist